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SOVIET MILITARY DOCTRINE:

CHANGE AND CHALLENGE

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# SOVIET MILITARY DOCTRINE: CHANGE AND CHALLENGE

by Bruce W. Menning\*

During 1987, the Soviet Union redefined its military doctrine to emphasize defensiveness and war prevention. Before 1987, the operative definition for Soviet military doctrine was, "a system of views of a state at a given time on the essence, objectives, and nature of possible future war, on the preparation for it by the country and the armed forces and on the means of its conduct."<sup>1</sup> By October 1987, the same definition had become, "a system of basic views on the prevention of war, on military organizational development, preparation of the country and the armed forces for repelling aggression, and methods of conducting warfare in defense of socialism."<sup>2</sup>

Western observers reacted variously to this change, with responses ranging from relief through disbelief to skepticism and silence. Differences in response reflected a combination of circumstances, including varying perspectives, perceptions, and persuasions. In retrospect, analysts and commentators alike needed an opportunity both to establish context and to view the process of redefinition and its consequences as they unfolded over time.

Initially, the variety of responses stemmed in no small part from a profound disparity between Western and Soviet understandings of military doctrine. For many western nations, military doctrine retains a narrow, military and technically-oriented definition. For example, an official U.S. Department of Defense publication, JCS Pub. 1, defines military doctrine as "fundamental principles by which the military forces or elements thereof guide their actions in support of national objectives."<sup>3</sup> In contrast, since the early 1920s, the Soviets have viewed military doctrine more broadly as a statement of a nation's defense policy and posture as conditioned by the class nature of that nation's society.<sup>4</sup>

Key to understanding the contemporary implications of a redefined Soviet military doctrine are two important considerations. First, redefinition accords with General Secretary M. S. Gorbachev's "New Thinking" as systematically propounded at the 27th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (February 1986). At the Congress and in subsequent pronouncements, he has emphasized a new approach to international security matters, underscoring a number of important concerns,

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\*The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and should not be construed to represent those of the U.S. Department of the Army or the U.S. Department of Defense.

including the dangers of nuclear and conventional arms races, the necessity to seek novel regional and global security arrangements, the possibility of ecological catastrophe from future large-scale wars, and the requirement for stability and defensive sufficiency.<sup>5</sup> Gorbachev has linked these concerns to arms control, and the 1987-redefinition of military doctrine logically flows from them.

Second, the concept of Soviet military doctrine embraces a number of issues which must be understood in their own right--but within the context of Gorbachev's "New Thinking." Shaped by the military policy of the CPSU, Soviet military doctrine also draws from Soviet military science to reflect changes not only in politics and policy but also anticipated changes in military art. For the Soviets, military science constitutes a legitimate discipline, a primary purpose of which is to forecast the nature of and requirements for future war. In the words of several prominent Soviet military commentators, "in its essence, military science is the science of future war."<sup>6</sup>

Because of explicit and implicit linkages between politics and war, Soviet military doctrine always has two sides (aspects): political (sometimes socio-political) and military-technical.<sup>7</sup> Historically, the first has tended to remain stable, while the second, thanks to technological change, has sometimes changed very rapidly. Because of Gorbachev's "New Thinking" and because of the prospect for continuing military change, both sides of Soviet military doctrine appear to be undergoing profound alteration. The current redefinition is a dramatic expression of change on both sides of the doctrinal equation.

Many commentators have missed the fact that redefined military doctrine also implies a radically-changed sense of threat and the imminence of war. For reasons which are not fully clear, the Soviets have apparently concluded that, while U. S. imperialism may still be the primary source of future war, for the moment other developments and dangers are greater, while the threat of imperialism is less.<sup>8</sup> By recasting the threat in this and other ways, the Soviets have reverted to a 1920s-like posture in which they can emphasize diplomatic initiatives and concentrate on internal development during a period of significant shifts in the international system.

Internally, the Soviets are concerned with a stagnant command economy, bureaucratic rigidity, uneven development, and continued technological lag. Gorbachev's initial tack was to contend with these problems by emphasizing "acceleration," a process which he subsequently deepened to call for "restructuring" (perestroyka). The logic of the argument is that only through restructuring (accompanied by glasnost' and demokratizatsiya) can Party and Government thrust Soviet society and economy into the post-industrial age.

For the Soviet military, particularly the General Staff, the military implications of perestroika loom large. According to Soviet military literature, developed military establishments now confront a pattern of continuing scientific-technical change which threatens to culminate in a genuine revolution in military art. That is, a number of technological developments, beginning with the advent of automated troop control systems and precision-guided weaponry, and eventually leading to weapons based on new physical principles (lasers, radio frequency weapons, advanced munitions) promise over the next several decades to produce radical changes in military art.<sup>9</sup>

In the aggregate, the changes which Soviet authors anticipate are potentially revolutionary because they promise to have simultaneous impact on all three levels of military art (military strategy, operational art, and tactics).<sup>10</sup> If Soviet and Warsaw Pact military forecasters are correct, the new weaponry written large will alter the dialectic between offense and defense, require increased maneuver and mobility, lead to rapid transitions between offense and defense, broaden the scale of combat, and underscore the significance of the struggle for information.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the new weaponry promises to blur traditional distinctions between nuclear and conventional combat.<sup>12</sup>

From these assumptions there would appear to follow a series of requirements for reorganization and force restructuring to meet the changing conditions of possible future war. These requirements would include the necessity to streamline forces, to increase aviation assets and air mobility, to alter logistical and command and control structures, and to develop, deploy, and integrate high-tech weaponry into combined arms combat.<sup>13</sup>

However, from the General Staff's point of view, the traditional Soviet command economy is not suited to the kind of dramatic scientific and technical innovation implicit in a deepening military-technical revolution. The pace and scope of the latter entails an altered relationship between pure science and military application. The prospect for dramatic change also implies an information-based approach to altered military requirements and possible sectoral changes in investment and production. In short, the requirements for future war would strongly support many of the same civilian-oriented requirements explicit in Gorbachev's campaign for perestroika.<sup>14</sup>

In the aggregate, then, a combination of considerations, including altered domestic and international priorities and future military requirements, provide a powerful rationale for a changed Soviet military doctrine. The changing threat assessment implicit in redefined doctrine corresponds with perceptions of changing global assessments and correlations. Emphasis on war prevention and defensive sufficiency accords well with the need



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to diminish the possibility of nuclear war and underscores the importance of congruity between political ends and military means.<sup>15</sup> Changed military doctrine also redirects the ideological struggle and serves to manage the threat during a period of revolutionary military change. Finally, a redefined military doctrine promises to enhance discord within the Western Alliance. As these considerations make themselves felt, the cumulative effect may help the Soviet Union buy time for a breathing space (peredyshka), during which Gorbachev can continue to orchestrate his program of directed change.

A final important consideration is that a redefined Soviet military doctrine bears significant implications for the arms control process. The issue of doctrine invites dialogue with the West, fosters reassessments of various balances and asymmetries, serves to set the agenda for negotiations, and helps enmesh the Western military more firmly in political processes. As negotiations on arms control and confidence-building measures wind their tortuous way, items on the Soviet and Warsaw Pact agenda for resolution of doctrinal differences will probably include organizational structures, arms and equipment, training and combat readiness, military art (offense and defense), military budgets, and issues of economic, technical, and scientific infrastructure.<sup>16</sup>

At the same time, this commentator must underscore what redefined Soviet military doctrine does not mean. It does not mean that the Soviets have given up on the dialectics of offense and defense.<sup>17</sup> Nor does it mean that the Soviets think they can stop the march of either technology or military art and science. Nor does it mean that the Soviets will cease the ideological struggle.<sup>18</sup> Finally, changed doctrine does not necessarily mean that the redefinition process is irreversible.

In conclusion, redefined Soviet military doctrine offers both more and less than first glimpse promises. Changed doctrine provides no instant panacea for the resolution of important political and ideological differences. Nor does it mean any instantaneous change in combat capabilities. However, the Soviet understanding of doctrine does offer key insights into the way that the Party and the General Staff visualize the Soviet military future. The possibility of contending visions and interpretations may also cause theoretical difficulties for the Soviets themselves. In the end, Western observers must understand that change is an unfolding process. A key issue remains the extent to which military glasnost will provide greater transparency of the Soviet military system, thereby affording outside observers the opportunity to determine how

redefined military doctrine will be reflected in force structure, posture, and military art.

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## ENDNOTES

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4. See, for example, Bol'shaya sovetskaya entsiklopediya, 1st ed., 65 vols. (Moscow, 1926-47), XII, s.v. "Voyennaya doktrina."
5. See, for example, Materialy XXVII s"yezda Kommunisticheskoy Partii Sovetskogo Soiuza (Moscow, 1986), pp. 20-21, 67, 177.
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14. See, for example, M. Yasyukov, "Po glave voyennogo stroitel'stva," Krasnaya zvezda, 3 December 1986, p. 3.
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18. On ideological confrontation, see especially Yu. Ya. Kirshin, V. M. Popov, and R. A. Savushkin, Politicheskoye sodержaniye sovremennykh voyn (Moscow, 1987), p. 253.